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SUBJECT: ECUADOR ELECTIONS: Andean Parliament Sideshow

¶1. (SBU) Summary: On October 15, many Ecuadorians may be surprised to learn that they must also decide, in addition to selecting among the candidates for president, Congress, provincial and municipal council officials, who will represent them in the little known, little respected, Andean Parliament. The race has significance, however, to the older, distinguished, and sidelined politicians seeking to fill Ecuador's five slots in the Parliament. It also counts to the parties supporting them, who receive a boost to their survival prospects with every vote. Exceptional candidates like Ivonne Baki even have hopes of making the Parliament relevant. Ultimately, however, the Parliament has yet to prove its importance to the average voter. End Summary.

Background and Electoral History

¶2. (U) On October 15, Ecuadorians will go to the polls to elect a new president, congressional deputies, mayors, provincial officials and five parliamentarians to the Andean Parliament. The Parliament is currently composed of members from Ecuador, Colombia, Peru and Bolivia, with Venezuela opting out and Chile joining as an associate member in 2006. The Parliament's assembly, its main decision-making body, currently consists of twenty members, five from each member country, with a two-year revolving presidency and three vice presidents. The Parliament's main objectives include integration of the member states, harmonization of laws, and coordination and cooperation among its member parliaments. The Parliament is based in Bogota, and Colombia currently occupies the presidency. One of Ecuador's newly elected Parliamentarians will assume the presidency in 2007.

¶3. (U) The Parliament is part of a set of Andean regional institutions. The Andean Community of Nations (CAN), created in 1969 under the Cartagena Accord, is a sub-regional economic and political organization based in Lima, Peru. In 1979, the CAN signed a treaty creating the Andean Court of Justice, the Andean Parliament and the Andean Council of Foreign Ministers. The CAN's five original members were Ecuador, Colombia, Peru, Bolivia and Venezuela. In April 2006, Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez withdrew Venezuela from the CAN in protest against the signing of Free Trade Agreements between Colombia and Peru with the United States, and joined MERCOSUR.

¶4. (SBU) The Parliament has a credibility problem, and is widely viewed as irrelevant since it does not have binding regional legislative powers. Luis Fernando Duque, current Andean Parliament president, acknowledged in press reports that the organization's main challenges were to further integration and finally become relevant to member states' citizens. Duque cited as a key step forward prospective implementation in 2007 of a new "Andean passport," which will allow citizens unimpeded travel and freedom to work in any of the member states. He also claimed as a modest but notable success the recognition of university degrees from all member countries.

¶5. (U) Prior to the 2002 elections, Ecuador's Congress selected its five Andean Parliament members. Beginning in 2002, the candidates were chosen by popular vote. Unlike on other ballots, where voters may choose between voting for individuals or by party list, voters may only vote by party list for the Parliament. The votes count toward the five percent minimum required to retain official party registry. The five winning candidates, in descending order of popularity, were Juana Vallejo (PSC), Blasco Pena Herrera (PSC), Freddy Ehlers (NP), Hector Solorzano (PRE), and Jorge Fantoni (PRIAN).

The Current Race

¶6. (U) In the election on October 15, 35 Ecuadorian candidates, from nine political parties, are vying for five Parliament positions. Among the most prominent and heading each party list are former Ambassador to the U.S. Ivonne Baki (PSP), former president Sixto Duran Ballen (UDC), and former congressman Marcelo Dotti (PSC), Wilson Sanchez (PRIAN), and Guillermo Landazuri (ID).

Ivonne Outshines the Rest

¶7. (SBU) Baki served in 1998 as Ecuador's first female ambassador to the U.S., ran unsuccessfully for president in 2002, and served in Lucio Gutierrez' government as Commerce minister. A long-time friend of the Embassy with many influential friends in the U.S., Baki told PolOff on October 5 that her friend and fellow environmentalist Bo Derek had recently visited Ecuador for the fifth time to promote the Galapagos Foundation and to offer her support for Baki's candidacy. In April, Ms. Derek was named as U.S. Special Wildlife Envoy of the Secretary of State for wildlife trafficking. Her current trip was again to promote the foundation's conservation efforts in the Galapagos Islands and to offer her personal support for her close friend's candidacy.

¶8. (SBU) Baki admitted she had not done much campaigning for the Parliament because most Ecuadorians are not familiar with the Parliament. As a parliamentarian she would lead the effort to expose her countrymen to the Parliament's functions and importance. She believed the current group of Ecuadorian parliamentarians had failed to do so, partly due to contentious relations between the Ecuadorian members.

¶9. (SBU) If elected, Baki would work on lowering unemployment and poverty, improving education and health care, attracting foreign investment, creating business opportunities and promoting peace. In the latter Baki referred to Colombia's internal conflict. She would also support expanding the Parliament's power to legislate, along the lines of the European Community, to increase its relevance.

¶10. (SBU) Touching on national politics, Baki commented that Ecuador's middle and upper classes were demoralized about politics and instability, and many would abstain from voting. She confided that if front-runner Rafael Correa won the election and insisted on convoking a Constituent Assembly without congressional support, chaos could ensue. If Correa were to force the issue by calling his supporters into the streets, she worried that "civil war" could break out.

Comment

¶11. (SBU) The Andean Parliament is viewed as irrelevant to most Ecuadorians, a sinecure for older or sidelined politicians. Baki's candidacy strikes us as an exception, given her aspirations, background, and force of personality. Ever optimistic and forward-looking, Baki told the DCM she had already lined up support to assume the Parliament's presidency in 2007. Her dire warnings of civil war should Correa win the Ecuadorian presidency give us pause, but could be exaggerated. If recent history is any guide, Ecuadorians are more likely to give a new president a chance before taking to the streets.